

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY**INFORMATION SHEET 27****MERSEY FERRIES**

The Mersey Ferries have a long and distinguished history, probably going back to the early 13th century. The Liverpool to Woodside ferry was in existence in 1318 under a charter given to the Prior of Birkenhead. After the dissolution of the monasteries the rights to the ferries passed through various individuals. In 1330 there is a reference to a ferry between Liverpool and Seacombe and in 1509 there are records of a service from Liverpool to Eastham. Services from Liverpool to Tranmere were introduced in the 16th century and to Rock Ferry by 1660. In the pre-steamship days the ferries consisted of sailing or rowing boats and the service was probably erratic.

The first steamship to operate on the Mersey was the *Elizabeth*, a wooden paddle steamer, which was introduced in 1815 to operate between Liverpool and Runcorn. Two years later a steam ferry was introduced on the Tranmere route and in 1822 the paddle steamer *Royal Mail* began its commercial operation between Liverpool and Woodside. Paddle steamers were introduced on the other Mersey ferry routes in the 1820s and 1830s. Several new routes were introduced: 1829 to Egremont, 1833 to New Brighton and 1835 to Monks Ferry. In 1865 the so-called 'New' ferry service was introduced between Liverpool Pier Head, Toxteth and Birkenhead.

Up until the mid-19th century the Mersey ferries were operated by an assortment of individual entrepreneurs and railway companies. By 1840 the Birkenhead and Chester Railway Company owned the Woodside ferry. When the company threatened to put up charges, the Birkenhead Improvement Commissioners became lessees of the service and purchased the ferry rights in 1858. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Birkenhead Corporation (who succeeded the Improvement Commissioners) were also operating the New Ferry, Rock Ferry and Tranmere ferry services. In 1862 Wallasey Local Government Board acquired the Liverpool to Seacombe, Egremont and New Brighton ferries.

In 1879 a screw-driven ferry was introduced on the Liverpool to Woodside route. This was the *Oxton*, which was the first so-called 'luggage-boat' which could carry vehicles. The *Oxton* had twin screws fore and aft.

In 1886 the Mersey Railway Tunnel was opened and this provided competition for the various ferry services. In 1894 trains were carrying 25,000 passengers per day and the ferries 44,000 per day.

In 1906 Wallasey Corporation (as the local board became known) introduced the TSS *Iris* and the TSS *Daffodil*. They became famous because of their exploits during World War I and at Zeebrugge in April 1918. They needed extensive refitting before they could resume peacetime activities. When they did so in 1919, they were re-named *Royal Iris* and *Royal Daffodil*; the former was sold in 1932 and the latter in 1934.

The current *Royal Iris*, delivered for service on the Mersey in 1950, was utilised in the 1980s as a restaurant and for short river cruises. In 1991 she was sold and at present resides on the River Thames, London.

The *Royal Daffodil* of 1958 was re-named *Ioulis Keas II* in the 1970s and left the River Mersey for service in Greek waters. The present *Royal Daffodil* is the refurbished *Overchurch* and can be seen today cruising the Mersey in full splendour.

A Mersey Ferries website is available at www.merseyferries.co.uk, and has details of Mersey ferries past and present, and additional information on timetables, cruises and charters.

Publications listed below are all available for use at the Maritime Archives & Library, Merseyside Maritime Museum.

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